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ABSTRACT

Eighty subjects, at each of four age levels (kindergarten, grade 2, grade 4, and university) were questioned concerning their ideas about the structure of the family. Information was gathered on which persons the subjects considered to be members of their own families, how subjects conceptualized a typical family and what criteria they used in judging whether a grouping of people represents a family. In children's consideration of their own families and construction of typical families, no age differences were found. A nuclear family grouping was most salient in both cases, and all respondents constructed similar typical families, consisting of two parents and their children. Major age-related differences were apparent in the criteria adopted for classifying groupings as instances of a family. Common residence, contact between members, the presence of children, single parenthood, blood or legal relationship and same-sex versus cross-sex partners were variables that were manipulated and found to be of differing importance as criteria for the respondents in the four age groups. Basically, the youngest subjects relied upon common residence and contact between members as the criteria for evaluating families, whereas, with increasing age, increasing emphasis was placed upon blood or legal relationship. No obvious relation could be found between the members of the children's nuclear or extended families, the amount of time spent with, or frequency of contact with, the children and the responses to any of the three parts of this study. (Author/RH)

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The Development of the Child's Concept of the Family

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The present study is part of a thesis submitted to the University of Western Ontario by the first author in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. James Olson in the preparation of an earlier version of this paper. Appreciation is also expressed to the London Board of Education and the principal, teachers, parents and children of Evelyn Harrison and Huron Heights Public Schools for their cooperation. Requests for reprints can be addressed to either author at the Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2

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Abstract

Twenty children in each of kindergarten, grade 2 and grade 4, and twenty university students, were questioned concerning their ideas about the structure of the family. Information was gathered on which persons children consider to be members of their own families, how a typical family is conceptualized and what criteria are used in judging whether a grouping of people represents a family. In considering their own families, and in constructing typical families, no age differences were found. A nuclear family grouping was most salient in both cases, and all respondents constructed similar typical families, consisting of two parents and their children. Major age-related differences were apparent in the criteria adopted for classifying groupings as instances of a family. Living together, contact between members, the presence of children, single parenthood, blood or legal relationship and same-sex versus cross-sex partners were variables that were manipulated and found to be of differing importance as criteria for the respondents in the four age groups. Basically, the youngest subjects relied upon common residence and contact between members as the criteria for evaluating families whereas, with increasing age, emphasis was placed upon blood or legal relationship. Those experiences within the children's own families that were investigated were found not to relate to their family concepts.

Although researchers have studied the child's ideas about specific family members and their characteristics, roles and relationships (e.g., Emmerich, 1961; Haviland & Clarke, 1974; Kagan & Lemken, 1960), the child's concept of the family is a factor of potential importance that has received little investigative attention. Our knowledge about how the child views the structure of the family, including what are accepted as representative instances and who are considered to be family members, is surprisingly very limited.

Piaget (1928) reported developmental differences in the definitions of a family offered by 7 to 13 year old boys. Three stages were noted in their responses. In stage one, "family" included all people living with the child. During stage two, the idea of biological relationship gained importance, and "family" was limited to biological relatives who were living with the child. Finally, by stage three, "family" was defined independently of location of residence and was generalized to include all biological relatives.

Moore (Note 1), asked children ranging in age from 4 to 13 years to consider whether each of six different groupings of people presented were instances of a family. Children of all ages agreed that a two generation group (parents and a child) and a three generation group (grandparents, parents and a child) were families. Most of the children (73%) also accepted couples without children as families. There was, however, some doubt concerning the status of a single parent grouping, and only slightly more than half of the children fully accepted pictures with a missing parent as showing families. Differences due to cognitive level and intactness of the child's own family were also noted. Concrete operational children, as opposed to preoperational and formal operational children, were least likely to accept a single parent grouping as a family.

Children from single parent homes more readily accepted such a grouping as a family than those from intact homes.

A third source of relevant information is Schneider's (1968) paper on American kinship. Information from a variety of sources, including interviews with 99 children aged 6 through 18, was used to examine the American kinship system. No distinction between the responses of adults and children was given. Schneider concluded that the American family is seen as a mated pair, rearing their young in a place of their own. A married couple without children, or a single parent and child, are not considered to be families. Moreover, a family, to be a family, must live together. Relatives are defined as persons who are related by blood or marriage, but the actual decision concerning who is considered to be a relative was seen to be tempered by such factors as perceived genealogical, socioemotional or physical distance between the persons involved.

Saltz and Medow (1971) and Anglin (1977) have suggested that the concepts of children are often restricted, being limited to the specific instances from which they were derived. A new instance of a concept may be rejected if it fails to possess some attribute that the child noted on previous instances. Such a criterial attribute (Anglin, 1977) is an integral part of the definition of the concept. The present study explored the development of the child's concept of the family by determining what, for respondents at each of four age levels, are the criterial attributes used in defining the concept of the family.

Method

Subjects

Eighty subjects participated in the study. Sixty of the subjects were local elementary school children, ten boys and ten girls from each of kindergarten (mean age: 5 years, 11 months, SD = 3.6 months), grade 2 (mean age: 8 years, SD =

5.0 months) and grade 4 (mean age: 9 years, 11 months, SD = 4.9 months). The children were predominantly from middle class backgrounds and intact, two parent families. The remaining twenty subjects were ten male and ten female university undergraduate students (mean age: 21 years, 3 months, SD = 1.67 years). These students were enrolled in summer school courses and volunteered to participate in the study. In addition, the parents of the elementary school children were given a questionnaire to complete. Forty-four (73%) of these questionnaires were returned.

Instruments

The Family Concept Interview was designed for use in this study. This instrument contains questions constructed to explore children's ideas concerning several aspects of the concept of the family, including its origins, permanence, universality, structure and function. Only those questions in the interview dealing with the structure of the family will be discussed in this paper. Table 1 presents a list of these relevant questions.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Part A examined who children include as members of their own families. Part B dealt with the children's ideas concerning the structure of a typical family. The children chose a typical family out of 18 cardboard figures that they were shown. The set of figures included 2 elderly males, 2 elderly females, 3 adult males, 3 adult females, and 8 children (4 boys and 4 girls) of varying ages. Part C explored the children's notions of the necessary structure of the family. Eighteen cardboard figures were presented in various combinations, so that the dimensions of living together, contact between members, presence of

children, single parenthood, blood or legal relationship and sex of partners were varied. The order of presentation of the single mother and single father stimuli was counterbalanced within each age level by sex grouping.

The university students were given a questionnaire to fill out. Because Part A was originally intended only as a check on whether the children understood what was meant by the term "family", this question was not given to the university students. Parts B and C were included in the questionnaire. In addition, with respect to Part C, the university students were asked to rate, on a seven-point scale ranging from very typical to very atypical, how closely each of the stimuli presented conformed to their image of a typical or central instance of the concept "family".

The parent questionnaire provided information on the child's own family composition, and the frequency of contact and amount of time spent with family members.

Procedure

Each child was individually interviewed at school. Prior to the interview, the child was told that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and was encouraged to say whatever came to mind. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Upon completion of the interview, the child was given an envelope to be taken home, which contained the parent questionnaire. The university students completed their questionnaires at the university.

Results

Part A. Who is in your family?

This question was presented only to the elementary school children. At all three age levels, the modal response included only the members of the nuclear family (85% in kindergarten, 75% in grade 2, 100% in grade 4). There was vir-

tually perfect agreement between the children's listings of family members and the listings given by their parents. One third of those children who were known to have family pets included them as family members.

Part B. Constructed family.

Most of the respondents (64%) constructed a family including two parents and their children. An additional 26% also included grandparents. Only 8% included other members of the extended family. The mean number of children included was 3.2, with a range from 1 to 13, and a modal response of 3. A large proportion of the children (78%) included a baby in their constructed family. Sixty percent of the female university students also included a baby, although none of the male university students did. Ninety-four percent of the respondents included at least one child of each sex in their constructed family. Only 10% of the children, distributed among all age levels, constructed a family group which matched their own. There were no age differences in the responding to this question.

Part C. Is this a family?

Chi square analyses were performed on the responses to each question, in order to test for the homogeneity of proportions between age levels. Due to the large number of analyses that were performed, the Bonferroni X^2 statistic (Jensen, Beus & Storm, 1968) was employed. In the case of a significant chi square value, post hoc multiple comparisons, utilizing the simultaneous confidence-interval procedure (Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977), were carried out in order to identify where the significant differences lay. Tests to determine whether, for each question, there was a linear or quadratic relationship between percentage of affirmative responding and age level (Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977) were also performed.

Table 2 presents the percentage of subjects responding affirmatively to each part of the question, the X^2 values and the mean typicality ratings of the university students. Also indicated are the significant linear and quadratic relationships. Table 3 shows the significant pairwise comparisons for those questions in which there was a significant overall chi square value.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 About Here

Comparisons of the answers of males and females at each age level produced no more statistically significant differences than would be expected by chance. There were no order effects based on which of the single parent groups was presented first.

All respondents agreed that a married couple with their child (#2) comprises a family. There were also no significant age differences in the classification of a childless married couple (#1), a married couple with a child who is not their own (#9), in the inclusion of an aunt, uncle and cousin as members of the family (#14) or in the acceptance of a group without love (#16). All other stimuli produced significant developmental differences.

Inspection of Tables 2 and 3 reveals consistent response patterns. The kindergarten children differed from all other groups in their responses to the stimuli involving nonrelatives living together. Kindergarten and grade 2 children tended to respond similarly to each other, but differently from grade 4 and university students, to the stimuli involving relatives living apart or having no contact, and to single parent groupings. Grade 4 and university students were very similar in their responding and differed significantly for only two of the stimuli.

The kindergarten children more readily accepted nonrelatives as family members than respondents in the other three groups. Both a child (#8) and an adult (#10) living within a family were considered to be a part of the family, and two women living together, either with (#18) or without (#17) children were accepted as instances of a family. Extended family members (#5, #6, #14), however, and nuclear family members living in a different place (#4, #7, #12) were less likely to be considered family members by the kindergarten and grade 2 children than by the grade 4 and university students. Similarly, kindergarten and grade 2 children less readily accepted single parent groupings (#3, #11) than grade 4 and university students. University students, more readily than those in any other group, accepted three children with no parents as an instance of a family.

A linear relationship between age level and proportion of affirmative responses was found for most of the stimuli. Thus, whereas a childless married couple (#1), single parent groupings (#3, #11) and groupings including extended family members (#5, #13) were considered families by only about half of the kindergarten and grade 2 children, this proportion increased linearly with increasing age. With increasing age, there was also an increased acceptance of relatives who were living apart from a family (#4, #6, #7, #12, #14) as members of the family. On the other hand, with increasing age came a decrease in the acceptance of nonrelatives (#10, #17, #18) as family members and a decrease in the importance attached to love in a relationship (#16).

The mean ratings in Table 2 refer to the ratings of the university students on how closely each of the stimuli conformed to their image of a typical family. Lower ratings reflect a judgment of a closer match to the target of a typical family. The married couple with their child (#2) was rated most typical, with

a mean of 1.05. A married couple with two children, one of whom lives out of town (#7), received the next most typical rating of 1.89. A family scene including extended family members, either grandparents (#5) or an aunt, uncle and cousin (#13) were rated slightly less typical with ratings of 2.15 and 2.68, respectively. The childless married couple received a mean rating of 2.50 and was considered closer to the image of a typical family than a single mother (3.30) or single father (3.00) situation. Infrequent contact again moved the rating away from the typical pole -- 3.44 for grandparents and 3.72 for an aunt, uncle and cousin. Three children with no parents received a rating of 3.42, in the middle of the scale. The absence of love produced a mean rating of 4.32. Nonrelatives living within a family were rated toward the atypical pole -- 4.72 for the child and 4.47 for the adult. Finally, the most atypical instances were the single women, both with and without children, receiving mean ratings of 5.58.

The Newman-Keuls multiple comparison procedure was employed to determine which of the stimuli are seen as significantly less typical than the very typical grouping of a married couple with their child (#2). At the 5% level of significance all stimuli, with the exception of #7, the grouping with the brother living in a different city, and #6, the extended family grouping including the grandparents, were considered significantly less typical instances of a family than a married couple and their child.

No obvious relation could be found between the members of the children's nuclear or extended families, the amount of time spent with, or frequency of contact with, the children and the responses to any of the three parts of this study.

Discussion

In thinking of their own families, it appears that it is only the members of their nuclear or immediate families who come to mind for the majority (87%) of the children. Nuclear family membership and place of residence overlap, however, and only three children listed as members of their family any persons other than those residing in their home. On the basis of these data, it is not possible to determine which of these variables is used by the children in making their decisions about who to consider as members of their families.

When asked to construct a typical family, it appears that a nuclear family grouping is most salient for all respondents. There was very little difference among the families constructed by the respondents in the four age groups. A typical family consists of two parents and their three children. One of the children is often a baby, and there is generally at least one child of each sex included.

Although there was no difference between age groups in conceptualizing the structure of a typical family, and, indeed, in Part C, all groups agreed that two parents and a child (#2) represented a family, pronounced age-related differences did appear when judgments were made about stimuli that departed from the typical.

The existence of a significant linear relationship in most of the comparisons in Part C confirms the presence of a developmental sequence in the criteria adopted for defining a family. Kindergarten children utilize one set of criteria, which differs from that employed by the respondents in the two oldest groups. These older subjects differed very little in the criteria they use. Grade 2 children appear to share some of the criteria employed by the kindergarten children and others employed by the older respondents.

For the kindergarten children, living together or having contact appear to be necessary attributes in order for an instance to be classified as a family. No group in which members lived apart or had no contact with each other was accepted as an instance of a family. Thus, a man or woman living apart from spouse and child, members of the extended family having no contact with nuclear family members and a brother living out of town were not accepted as family members. On the other hand, both a child and adult who were not related to, but were living with, a family were accepted as family members and two single women living together, either with or without children, were categorized as families. Living together, however, does not appear to be a sufficient criterion. The presence of two parents and the presence of children would also appear to be considerations, as only about half of the kindergarten children accepted a single parent grouping or a childless married couple as families. Similarly, there appears to be a distinction between nuclear and extended family, with, again, only about half of these children considering groupings including extended family members as families. Finally, the presence of love is also considered to be important, and a married couple and their child who did not love each other was rejected as an instance of a family.

With increasing age, the criteria used to define a family appear to systematically change. Living together and having contact gradually lose importance, and the existence of a blood or legal relationship becomes all important. Persons with no blood or legal relationship, whether child or adult, are no longer accepted as family members, whereas single parent groups are classified as families and persons in both the nuclear and extended families are considered to be family members, regardless of where they live or the frequency of contact. Gradually, love loses its status as a criterial attribute.

In agreement with Piaget's (1928) report, the results of this study indicate that there is a developmental sequence in the acquisition of the concept of the family, and, in the early stages of the sequence, the variable of common residence is criterial, whereas, with increasing age, it is replaced by the variable of blood or legal relationship. Piaget's study, however, was limited. When the several variables that were manipulated in this study are also introduced, it becomes apparent that the concept of the family is a complex one, and that several factors are taken into consideration in the classification of a group of people as a family.

The centrality ratings of the university students were consistent with the stereotype of the typical family as constructed by all respondents. The addition of each variable that caused the stimulus to be less like the stereotypical family moved the rating away from the "typical" end of the scale. Even though the university students were relatively lenient with respect to classifying a group as a family, each of the variables manipulated -- childlessness, single parenthood, living apart, infrequent contact, absence of blood or legal relationship, same-sex partners -- caused the grouping to be viewed as less typical, with the most atypical or peripheral instances involving nonrelatives living within a family and same-sex partners.

Anglin (1977) also studied the acquisition and characteristics of concepts in young children, utilizing the child's first terms of reference. In discussing a concept, Anglin distinguished between its intension, which are its characteristic properties, and its extension, which are the instances representative of it. With regard to extension, Anglin found that young children tend both to overextend (classify as instances stimuli that are not part of the concept) and underextend (fail to classify as instances stimuli that are part of the concept).

Underextension responses most commonly occurred with peripheral instances of a concept, as determined by adult typicality ratings, whereas overextension responses were brought about most strongly by perceptual similarity between instances and noninstances.

Part C of this study deals with the extension of the concept of the family. As such, these results can be compared with Anglin's findings, although it is acknowledged that the family concept is not as well defined as those concepts that Anglin studied. Relative to adults, the young children of this study also overextended and underextended in their classification of families. The factors that Anglin found to determine these responses, however, do not appear to be the major influences in this study. For example, the most peripheral instances of the concept (#17, #18, #8, #10), as rated by the university students, were classified as families by most of the kindergarten children, although certain central instances (e.g., #7) were rejected. Although the factor of perceptual similarity may be difficult to apply to this study, and no adult ratings were actually obtained, certain findings appear to rule this out as a factor, as well. For example, the stimuli in question #2 (married couple and child) and question #16 (married couple and child who don't love each other) are, perceptually, perfectly similar, yet 90% of the kindergarten children accepted #2 as a family, whereas only 15% accepted #16.

Also in contrast with previous findings (e.g., Anglin, 1977; Saltz & Medow, 1971), the family concepts of even the youngest children in this study were not restricted to instances that they have experienced, either in their image of a typical family or in their acceptance of stimulus presentations as instances of families. Not only did very few of the children construct families to match

their own, but several of the presentations that the children readily accepted were uncommon and, undoubtedly, outside of the experience of most of the children.

It appears, then, that the development of a social concept, such as the family, differs in many ways from the development of other types of concepts that have been studied. More research is needed to identify the characteristics of the development of various familiar social concepts.

Although the age differences in the concept are striking and significant, the similarities between age levels in certain aspects of the concept are also notable. There is no apparent difference between even the youngest children and the adults in this study concerning their image of a typical family. Moreover, it is this same typical family which Schneider (1968) described as the image of the American family given by his respondents. Schneider, however, believed that this typical family was the only grouping that would be accepted as a family. This study has shown otherwise. Respondents of all ages were very flexible in classifying groupings as families and accepting of many groupings that departed from the norm.

The children's ideas concerning the family were not related to those experiences within their own families that this study examined. The families in this study represented a rather homogeneous group in terms of socioeconomic status and intactness. Children from different types of families may hold different ideas concerning the structure of the family. Indeed, Moore (Note 1) found differences between the family concepts of children from intact and single parent homes. Further investigation of the family concepts of children from other types of families may help to illuminate the role of experiential factors in the development of the concept.

Reference Note

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Table 1

Questions Asked During the

Family Concept Interview

Part A. Who is in your family?

Part B. (The respondent is asked to construct a "typical" family from 18 figures presented).

Who are the people in the family?

Part C.

1. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown. They are married. They live together. They have no children. Are they a family?
2. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown. This is their son Billy. They all live together. Are they a family?
3. Here is Mrs. Brown and her son, Billy. They live together, just the two of them. Are they a family?
4. Billy's father, Mr. Brown, lives in a different house. Is he in Billy's family?
5. These are Billy's grandmother and grandfather. Are they in Billy's family?
6. What if they live in a different city and he never sees them. Then, are they in his family?
7. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown and Billy. They all live together. This is Billy's brother, Bob. He lives in a different city. Is Bob in Billy's family?
8. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown and Billy. This is Billy's friend, Joe. They all live together. Is Joe in Billy's family?
9. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown, with Joe. They are living together, just the three of them. Are they a family?
10. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown and Billy. This is Miss Jones. She lives with them and helps take care of Billy. Is Miss Jones in Billy's family?
11. Here is Mr. Brown and his son, Billy. They live together, just the two of them. Are they a family?
12. Billy's mother, Mrs. Brown, lives in a different house. Is she in Billy's family?
13. These are Billy's aunt, uncle and cousin. Are they in Billy's family?
14. What if they live in a different city? Then, are they in his family?
15. Here is Billy, his brother, Bob, and their sister Sally. They live together, just the three of them. Are they a family?
16. Here are Mr. and Mrs. Brown and Billy. They all live together, but they don't love each other. Are they a family?
17. Here are two very good friends, Miss Black and Miss Smith. They live together. Are they a family?
18. This is Mrs. Brown and Billy. This is her friend, Mrs. Green and her son, David. They all live together. Are they a family?

Table 2

Percentage of Subjects Responding Affirmatively to

Each Stimulus Presentation Within Question 3

Stimulus	Group				$\chi^2(3)$[a]	Relationship[b]	Mean Typicality Rating[c]
	Kindergarten	Grade 2	Grade 4	University			
1. Mr. & Mrs. Brown	45	45	70	85	9.85	L	2.50
2. Mr. & Mrs. Brown, Billy	90	95	100	100	3.81	L	1.05
3. Mrs. Brown & Billy	55	40	80	95	16.64 *	L	3.30
4. Is Mr. Brown in Billy's family	5	35	50	85	26.97 *	L	--
5. Billy's grandparents	60	55	85	100	14.40 *	L	2.15
6. Billy's grandparents, live in a different city	0	35	85	85	41.38 *	L	3.44
7. Brother Bob, lives in a different city	15	70	90	100	40.20 *	LQ	1.89
8. Mr. & Mrs. Brown, Billy & friend Joe	70	20	20	45	14.48 *	Q	4.72
9. Mr. & Mrs. Brown & Joe	80	60	40	70	7.47	-	3.95
10. Mr. & Mrs. Brown, Billy, Miss Jones	90	20	15	40	29.04 *	LQ	4.47
11. Mr. Brown & Billy	45	[illegible]	75	95	15.82 *	L	3.00
12. Is Mrs. Brown in Billy's family	10	25	75	90	35.60 *	L	--
13. Billy's aunt, uncle & cousin	45	55	80	85	10.01	L	2.68
14. Aunt, uncle & cousin, live in a different city	5	35	80	75	30.17 *	L	3.72
15. Billy, brother Bob, sister Sally	70	40	70	100	17.14 *	LQ	3.42
16. Mr. & Mrs. Brown, Billy, no love	15	55	55	70	13.36	L	4.32
17. Miss Black, Miss Smith	70	25	5	25	21.12 *	LQ	5.58
18. Mrs. Brown & Billy, Mrs. Green & David	85	20	10	40	27.97 *	LQ	5.58

a χ^2 must exceed 14.10 using the Bonferroni χ^2 statistic at $p < .05$.

* $p < .05$

b L indicates linear relationship between responding and age group, Q indicates quadratic relationship between responding and age group

c Lower ratings reflect a judgment of a closer match to the target of a typical family. Ratings ≥ 2.50 are significantly greater than the rating given to stimulus #2 at $p < .05$.

Table 3

Significant Pairwise Comparisons Within Part C

Stimulus	Age Groups Comparisons					
	K-2	K-4	K-U	2-4	2-U	4-U
3			*	*	*	
4		*	*		*	*
5			*		*	
6	*	*	*	*	*	
7	*	*	*		*	
8	*	*	*			
10	*	*	*			
11			*		*	
12		*	*	*	*	
14		*	*	*	*	
15			*		*	*
17	*	*	*			
18	*	*	*			

* indicates that the age groups differed significantly, $p < .05$.